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Humanitarianism, State Sovereignty and Authoritarian Regime Maintenance in the Syrian War

Reinoud Leenders and Kholoud Mansour

Abstract

Through a case study of the Syrian crisis since 2011 this article explores how humanitarianism, state sovereignty and authoritarian regime maintenance have come to be closely intertwined. While the Syrian regime's state sovereignty claims facilitated its tight control over a massive UN-led humanitarian aid effort, the latter in turn became a platform to project and magnify these claims, and to get them confirmed. The article details how the Syrian regime's injection of its state sovereignty claims into a large-scale humanitarian aid effort gave it access to critical benefits and resources that fed into its efforts of authoritarian regime maintenance at times of acute threats to its survival. Drawing on the notion of state sovereignty as a social construct, it shows that in response to the regime's loss of compliant domestic audiences for its implausible claims, the regime managed to compensate by turning its state sovereignty claims to external audiences, primarily by way of its cooperation with UN humanitarian agencies and their donors. These findings call for closer attention to assertive 'sovereign' states in humanitarian crises and civil war generally. They also suggest that it is important that the study of the international politics of authoritarianism broadens its mostly bilateral focus, and includes cooperation with international organisations.

On 22 February 2014, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted a sharply worded resolution on the Syrian crisis. Resolution 2139 called on all parties in the conflict to allow humanitarian workers to do their work while it strongly condemned those who failed to observe this imperative, foremost the Syrian government. Yet Syrian President Bashar al-Assad responded with glee, and confidently stated that the resolution must be implemented “with respect for the principles laid out in the UN charter, international law and the basic foundations of humanitarian work, especially state sovereignty and the role of the state, and principles of neutrality, transparency and non-politicised assistance.”¹

At first glance Assad's remarks could be taken as grossly out of touch with reality, as proof – if any additional proof was needed—of the regime's disingenuousness, and as yet another instance of it coating itself in the formulaic pomp so typical of a stiffly authoritarian regime clinging onto an image of reasonableness when its legitimacy long evaporated. Responding to another such speech Assad gave in Damascus' opera house a year earlier, Rami Khoury, a

Beirut-based commentator, captured this common perspective by saying: “It was operatic in its otherworldly fantasy, unrelated to realities outside the building.”²

In this article we present the argument that the regime’s embrace of humanitarianism and its key principles is not necessarily at odds with its blatant flouting of these same principles since the onset of the Syrian conflict in March 2011. On the contrary, the regime’s deliberate deprivation strategies and untold repression are, disturbingly, mediated by and to a significant degree enabled by UN-led humanitarian assistance in the country. From this the international humanitarian system emerges as a key vehicle by which the Syrian regime has effectively projected and reaffirmed its claims on state sovereignty. In turn, we argue that this helped the regime to generate tangible benefits and resources in its wider efforts to persist at all costs. In short, the regime’s discursive universe --ridiculed by commentators and Syrian activists alike-- *is* intimately related to ‘realities outside the opera building,’ as it has made humanitarianism complicit in the regime’s endeavours to withstand mounting challenges since the beginning of the conflict in early 2011.

Framing our effort analytically is an attempt to critically combine and, through the Syrian case, contribute to three rather dissipated literatures relevant to the study of, respectively, state sovereignty, humanitarianism, and authoritarian regime resilience. Accordingly, we answer calls to, respectively, “reclaim the dimension of empirical research”³ on state sovereignty and “‘move down’ from the broad study of authoritarian [international] diffusion to the concrete analysis of its constituent mechanisms.”⁴

We argue, firstly, that the Syrian conflict countered the emergence of contingent or diluted state sovereignty in the less developed world, a phenomenon variously welcomed by those

advocating humanitarian intervention⁵ while lamented by those seeing renewed Western penetration of the south in its name.⁶ While the actual erosion of state sovereignty since the end of the Cold War remains a matter of dispute, we contend that the Syrian conflict can be viewed as an exemplary case supporting those who all along contended that reports of the death of state sovereignty were premature at best. Less commonly, though, has it been noted that, especially in the context of civil war, state sovereignty can be reinforced by appropriating humanitarian organisations and their aid. Quite the contrary, these forces usually are viewed as challenging, compromising, or even usurping state sovereignty.⁷ The Syrian case suggests that effective state sovereignty claims at times of armed conflict have been catapulted back into the international realm due to the regime's projection of its categorical state sovereignty assertions onto and through the largest UN-led humanitarian assistance effort in decades.

Secondly, and echoing a number of scholars who have alluded to governments' manipulation and instrumentalization of nominal state sovereignty,⁸ we detail how the Syrian regime's injection of its state sovereignty claims into the humanitarian aid effort gave it access to critical benefits and resources produced by the 'humanitarian space' built by UN agencies and International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs). At times of steep challenges against it, these benefits and resources were critical to the regime's resilience. They were accrued endogenously to the humanitarian aid provided to some and denied to others, and by way of the benefits and perks associated with the regime's reinforced claims on state sovereignty more generally. We suggest that the sheer scale and systematic way by which the Syrian regime has pursued such resource mobilization strategies ought to be of interest to a growing academic focus on the international dimensions of authoritarian rule.⁹ Our findings point up to the importance of a perspective complementing and transcending the strictly bilateral ties

that much of this literature emphasizes, and place authoritarian governance firmly within the context of the international system of sovereign states and such regimes' cooperation with international organisations.

Thirdly, the Syrian case builds on the notion of state sovereignty as a social construct.¹⁰ We argue that in our case study this perspective gains additional pertinence given the Syrian regime's past record of relying on compliant domestic audiences participating in staged rituals to the effect of upholding implausible regime claims about its qualities and achievements more generally.¹¹ We maintain in this context that the illusory claims of the Syrian regime since 2011 no longer draw in a large domestic audience now its naked and brutal repression of Syrian citizens has become ubiquitous; in its place the regime's claim-making and consensual pretence has shifted to external audiences comprised of UN humanitarian agencies and donor states as the latter reinforced and sustained the Syrian regime's empirically implausible claims on state sovereignty. As often noted, both revolutionary situations and civil war produce competing, mutually exclusive claims on state sovereignty.¹² Yet the Syrian war suggests that authoritarian regimes can be highly successful in selecting and altering relevant audiences to uphold their claims. By constructing state sovereignty externally, such regimes are able to render largely inconsequential "whether some significant part of the subject population honors [its] claim."¹³

The article draws on some forty semi-structured interviews with foreign and Syrian aid workers, diplomats and donor representatives involved or formerly working in Syria, and with Syrian activists, businessmen, journalists and health professionals; most of them requested their names to be withheld. For these interviews we made visits to Damascus in November 2015 and January 2016 but due to the increasingly hazardous conditions in Syria most

respondents were contacted outside Syria --in Amman, Gaziantep, Beirut and several European capitals, or they were reached via telephone or Skype. In addition, we consulted a large amount of aid documents released by UN agencies and humanitarian organisations, (Arabic) media reports (including social media) and, where indicated, data derived from the Carter Center's Syria Mapping Project database.¹⁴

Syria's humanitarian crisis and the faltering response

From Table (1) it would reasonably appear that the prime challenge posed by Syria's rapidly growing humanitarian crisis is that donor countries simply have not been forthcoming enough in paying up for the steep costs of aid.

Table 1: UN Humanitarian Assistance to Syria 2012-2016¹⁵

	Appeal (US\$)	Funds received	Estimated people in need (2012-2015)	Proportion of people in need (at date of appeal) reached across sectors
2012	348m	62 %	1.5m (June) 2.5m (Sept.) 4m (Dec.)	n.a.
2013	1.41bln	68 %	6.8m (April)	36 %
2014	2.26bln	50 %	9.3m (April) 10.8m (Aug.) 12.2m (Nov.)	60 %
2015	2.9bln	43 %	13.5m (Oct.)	47 %
2016	3.2bln	52 %	13.5m (Dec.)	51 %

The UN-led humanitarian effort in Syria --amounting to US\$ 5.2bln between 2012-2016-- still classifies as the largest humanitarian effort worldwide.¹⁶ Yet it is clear that its scope has significantly fallen short of meeting needs. This has led UN humanitarian officials to continuously call on donor countries to dig deeper in their pockets. Taking a similar perspective, OXFAM issued its "fair share index", naming and shaming wealthy countries for their failure to share the burden of required humanitarian assistance in Syria and neighbouring countries combined.¹⁷ The Syrian government also pointed at funding shortfalls as the main cause of the shortcomings of international humanitarian assistance in Syria.¹⁸

Indeed, funding constraints forced UN agencies to reduce their aid packages, or at times suspend them altogether. Yet while acknowledging these financial constraints, reducing the UN's disappointing humanitarian performance in Syria to a lack of financial resources provides an incomplete picture at best. Many explanations compete in the margins of the oft-lamented shortage of funds. Most of these are catered to donor expectations and follow standard humanitarian evaluation concerns with the UN's humanitarian institutional architecture and coordination issues. Yet an explanation that places the UN humanitarian effort firmly and comprehensively in the context of its relations with the Syrian regime thus far has been relatively underdeveloped.

Humanitarian aid in Syria: regime control through sovereignty

One year into the Syrian conflict it began to dawn on the outside world that a major humanitarian catastrophe was unfolding in Syria, and that something needed to be done urgently to address it. Yet the Syrian government refused countrywide and unconditional access, delayed agreement on the modalities of UN-led operations, and imposed mounting conditions on UN agencies and INGOs partnering with them.¹⁹ An understanding was hammered out between May and August 2012 allowing eight UN agencies and nine INGOs to operate inside Syria. Further negotiations over government conditions and restrictions caused the “emergency response” under the UN Syria Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan (SHARP) and its first appeal for funding to be delayed to the end of that year. Before it allowed for stepped-up UN humanitarian operations, the regime made it abundantly clear that providing aid was not going to be for free, and that it attached a heavy price to it.

The Syrian regime's dragging its feet on the humanitarian front should be viewed in the threatening international context in which it found itself. Since the summer of 2011 a growing

number of (mainly Western and Gulf Arab) countries had been calling for Assad to step down. With mounting apprehension the regime looked at developments in Libya where, following UNSCR 1970 and 1973 (evoking the “responsibility to protect”), a NATO-led coalition imposed a no-fly zone culminating in an international military operation to remove Mu’ammarr al-Qaddafi. For Syria there was much less appetite to intervene on such a scale. Yet by the end of 2012 a large number of countries expressed support to the Syrian National Council, the Syrian opposition-in-exile, followed by the recognition of its successor, the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), by over 130 countries by December 2012. In short, while sovereign aspirants were proliferating inside Syria, the regime had a serious cause for concern that the outside world would follow suit and remove it from power.

Against this background, the Syrian regime presented the UN humanitarians --eager to start their provision of aid-- with a stiff demand. They were going to be instrumental in its efforts to confirm, bolster and project its imagining of and claims on state sovereignty. One senior UN official who arrived in Syria in the spring of 2012 recalled how his meetings with Syrian state officials transgressed into lectures on UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182 adopted in December 1991.²⁰ His Syrian counterparts appeared to know the resolution by heart:

The sovereignty, territorial integrity and national unity of States must be fully respected in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations. [...] The affected State has the primary role in the initiation, organization, coordination, and implementation of humanitarian assistance within its territory.

The resolution was to become a standard reference point for Syrian officials and diplomats insisting that the Syrian government was to be fully in charge of international humanitarian aid and that the relief effort ought to be premised on unconditional respect for Syrian state sovereignty. In view of this, the first four pages of the report by the UN-Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) looking back at achievements under SHARP

during its first year repeatedly reiterated and supported the Syrian regime's exclusive claim to state sovereignty.²¹ These were not mere ritualistic utterances of diplomatic protocol. If the UN was to provide humanitarian assistance in Syria, the regime was making sure that its endeavours were to be placed under its full control.

It is striking how few INGOs were authorised to work in tandem with the UN agencies in Syria. Initially eight such INGOs, already providing assistance to Iraqi refugees, were licensed to work on Syria's emerging crisis. Requests to allow for more INGOs caused their number to increase to 16 at the end of that year;²² according to UN officials still grossly inadequate to oversee and implement a multi-billion dollar humanitarian assistance program under increasingly harrowing conditions.²³ Further government restrictions caused these INGOs to work in only eight out of Syria's 12 governorates,²⁴ and they were banned from working with local relief organisations except the Syrian Arab Red Crescent Society (SARC).

International humanitarian staff in Syria rotated frequently, thus generating a constant need for visas, and prompting sustained opportunities for the regime to provide or, as often as it turned out, delay or deny visas in its re-affirmations of this most basic trait of state sovereignty. The regime prolonged procedures especially when requested to provide visas to nationals from countries supporting the opposition.²⁵ In February 2015 the regime expelled two foreign U.N workers ostensibly for negotiating humanitarian access with "terrorist" rebel groups in Aleppo.²⁶

Invoking its claims on state sovereignty, the regime imposed further controls over the humanitarian effort. First, SARC was given a gatekeeper's role at the pivot of the UN's humanitarian operations in Syria. It became a mandatory operational partner and focal point

for all INGOs registered and operating in the country. Several INGOs, although officially registered, never obtained authorization to operate in Syria because they failed to reach an agreement with SARC.²⁷ The latter also has been the main implementing partner for UN agencies as about 60 percent of UN relief came to be channelled through it.²⁸ The government undeniably controls SARC's central operations. Leaving little ambiguity about this, Syria is the only country that has a "state ministry for Red Crescent affairs". SARC's president, Abdul Rahman Attar, is variously described as a committed humanitarian;²⁹ but he also is a successful businessman who made his private fortune thanks to his intimate relations to the regime since the 1970s.³⁰ SARC has negotiated considerable leeway to provide humanitarian aid, and it has done so with increased professionalism. SARC received credit throughout the country for trying to make the best out of an impossible job, and for paying a heavy price as, by 2017, more than 40 of its staff and volunteers were killed.³¹ Yet humanitarian agencies still had to consider SARC as a potential choking point for aid to get through, providing the government with powerful leverage in what soon proved to be drawn-out negotiations over cross-line and cross-border assistance.³²

Under these already debilitating conditions, UN agencies had to select their local implementing partners. The latter were limited to government-designated NGOs. Some of the initially 107 Syrian charities authorised to partner with UN agencies may be dedicated and capable -- yet this is difficult to assess comprehensively as most UN agencies have not fully disclosed with whom exactly they were partnering. Some of these charities --like the Syria Trust for Development headed by the First Lady Asma al-Assad, and partnering with the UNHCR-- clearly serve the regime's political objectives.³³ Other UN agency partners, like al-Bustan charitable association, are tightly linked to senior regime incumbents, and have been instrumental to the state's outsourcing of violence to pro-regime militias and irregular

forces.³⁴ Al-Bustan is an official partner to UNICEF and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM).³⁵ Many government-accredited NGOs and charities ostensibly partnering with UN agencies presented themselves in strong support of the regime, dedicating their work to the regime and framing their relief in terms of “supporting martyr families” – a reference to families of those killed among regime troops.³⁶

All registered Syrian NGOs and charities are subject to intrusive controls by the Ministry of Social Affairs and local state authorities. The latter can instantly dismiss their management and appoint their own, as indeed happened to charities partnering with UN agencies.³⁷ The required government authorization needed for humanitarian work –with or without UN agencies-- also caused those Syrian humanitarians and charities not obtaining authorization to be subjected to harassment, arrest, prosecution and regime sanctioned killings from the start of the conflict.³⁸ The regime’s criminalization of unlicensed aid workers escaping its control reached its apex in the regime’s labelling of ‘Syria Civil Defence’ rescue workers (‘the White Helmets’) as “terrorists”, and in deliberately targeting them in “two-tap” air strikes.³⁹

Not only did the regime impose its supporters as the UN’s local partners; it parachuted them right within the UN agencies operating from Damascus.⁴⁰ Among senior local staff employed by UN agencies were individuals known for their ties to the Syrian secret police (*mukhabarat*) and relatives of senior regime incumbents.⁴¹

While tightening its grip on the international aid agencies, the Syrian regime interfered directly with UN agencies’ assessments of what aid was needed and where, and to whom it was to be delivered. Such began when in the spring of 2012 OCHA carried out a countrywide initial needs assessment. Chaperoned by regime minders and security agents, UN assessors

visited several governorates but crossed frontlines only a few times.⁴² State officials pruned the report they prepared word-by-word and changed the draft's use of the word "conflict" into "events", insisted on the use of the term "moving people" instead of internal displacement and, most importantly, toned down both the scope and urgency of registered needs.⁴³ The experience set the tone for the regime's sustained effort to determine publicly stated humanitarian needs, especially where real needs supposedly clashed with its desire to project the image of full state control and where this served the regime's interest in depriving rebel-held areas from aid.

Thus, it was only in June 2014 –three years into the conflict—that UN agencies formulated a "protection strategy" for civilians especially affected by the conflict, ostensibly because the regime was suspicious of the hint of failing state responsibility that the term implies.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the World Health Organisation (WHO), working with the Syrian government, reportedly understated the initial threat of the spread of polio by excluding Deir az-Zur from a vaccination campaign that began in December 2012.⁴⁵ Implausibly, the WHO responded to the accusation by saying that most inhabitants had already left the area; this was at a time that the World Food Program provided large-scale aid to the region.⁴⁶ It was in the same governorate that polio re-emerged less than one year later. Syrian health workers operating from southern Turkey argued that the WHO's reliance on Syrian state laboratories caused it to underestimate the threat posed by cholera and other contagious diseases, especially when originating in rebel-held areas.⁴⁷ Recent academic research is congruent with their claims.⁴⁸

OCHA also under-reported the scope and severity of needs in so-called "besieged areas". In February 2015 the UN Secretary General, using OCHA statistics, reported 11 such besieged areas in Syria with a combined affected population of 212,000.⁴⁹ The Syrian American

Medical Society (SAMS) conducted its own nation-wide survey using the UN definition for ‘besieged’.⁵⁰ For the same period it found 38 additional communities to be under siege while it put the total affected population at 640,200. It also concluded that 95 percent of those people affected at the time were besieged by Syrian government forces, compared to OCHA’s 87.5 percent. “Siege Watch,” an initiative by the Dutch peace organisation PAX and the Syria Institute, found similar discrepancies between UN data on sieges and information it gathered from its own network of local respondents.⁵¹ Differences in methodology and limitations in obtaining data explain some of the glaring differences in these assessments. When in December 2015 a heavily redacted draft of the UN’s Humanitarian Response Plan was leaked,⁵² there remained little doubt that UN agencies allowed the Syrian government to dictate and manipulate UN data on the number of besieged people and to coat its own responsibility for Syria’s humanitarian disaster in euphemisms and evasive language.⁵³ While in 2016 UN figures on sieges were revised upward, large discrepancies with independent estimates remained.⁵⁴

Taking state prerogatives to their extreme, the Syrian government imposed a barrage of additional administrative and political obstacles that severely hampered UN-led humanitarian efforts or denied access for assistance altogether.⁵⁵ As Ben Parker, OCHA’s Syria country chief until February 2013, stated: “In government-controlled parts of Syria, what, where and to whom to distribute aid, and even staff recruitment, have to be negotiated and are sometimes dictated.”⁵⁶ Especially cross-frontline humanitarian assistance was subjected to a host of crippling, administrative and politically motivated hurdles. For instance, throughout 2015 only 23 percent of UN convoy requests reportedly received government approval and less than half of these were able to proceed, primarily due to the Syrian government’s refusal to give security clearances.⁵⁷ Especially requests to deliver medical assistance, such as surgical

supplies, have been rejected or ignored. Even in cases where approval was granted, regime forces routinely removed medical supplies from convoys or refused to let them through.⁵⁸ In some cases they distributed the aid items they had seized to regime supporters and military personnel. In December 2013 footage was released of regime aircraft dropping aid parcels destined to its besieged troops in the town of Jasem (in Dar'a) – by mistake the parcels fell into rebel hands; they carried the WFP logo.⁵⁹ In May 2015 footage emerged of a rebel-seized government base in al-Mastuma, near Idlib storing large volumes of aid bearing the logo of UN agencies and the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC).⁶⁰ The regime also conditioned aid agencies' access to besieged civilians to relief to regime supporters in areas that the government could not access. This tit-for-tat approach soon became routine regime practice, at first tacitly and then, in a UN-brokered deal in January 2016, unequivocally as UN agencies were given momentary access to the regime-besieged town of Madaya only if they provided aid to the rebel-besieged towns of Fuaa and Kafraya. When none of its measures to control the aid flows satisfied the regime, the latter attacked aid convoys even after giving them permission to proceed and in full knowledge of their humanitarian destination. Most damagingly, in September 2016 regime helicopters and fixed wing aircraft repeatedly struck and destroyed a UN-commissioned SARC convoy west of Aleppo, killing at least 14 aid workers.⁶¹

Against this background of regime-imposed constraints and outright hostility, UN agencies and their partners had to walk a tightrope to operate and reach those in need of assistance. This involved a great deal of delicate manoeuvring, continuous negotiation, and engagement with all sides of the conflict. Yet the regime's ultimate control over the UN-led aid effort allowed it to consistently prevail and turn humanitarian assistance to its own advantage. The regime was able to do so by an array of measures that followed directly from its affirmation

and projection of its state sovereignty claims. These measures erected a suffocating institutional framework for international relief, imposed local partners, infiltrated UN agencies, interfered with the UN's needs assessments, and enforced a barrage of bureaucratic and political hurdles preserving the regime's discretion in allowing for the daily delivery of aid.

Seen through the perspective of much extant literature on humanitarianism, the Syrian regime's ability to impose itself as by far the dominant actor in its relations with UN humanitarian agencies would appear as highly remarkable and unexpected. State recipients of humanitarian aid in these studies are commonly described as outstripped by much more powerful and resourceful humanitarian bureaucracies that dictate the modalities and distribution of aid. According to this work, humanitarian agencies extended their interventionist prerogatives to a degree that they emerged as quasi-sovereigns and as potent instruments of donors' "reexpansion of the West's external sovereign frontier."⁶² In the Syrian war, such assessment barely resonate. Arguably, here quite the reverse has happened. Through its loud assertions of state sovereignty, the Syrian regime manoeuvred itself into the driving seat and became by far the dominant partner in its relations with UN humanitarian agencies and INGOs. At the same time, this development points up to the preoccupation and skills of an authoritarian regime to build, sustain and set the terms of cooperation with international humanitarian agencies, despite widespread international condemnation of its brutality. Accordingly, the Syrian regime's achievements in this respect appear to cast a new light on the ways in which authoritarian regimes are increasingly understood to "use multiple forms of international cooperation to sustain their rule."⁶³ As argued by a budding literature on this subject, such international linkages include bilateral ties to other autocratic regimes and democratic states alike. The Syrian case strongly suggests that to these bilateral ties

should be added authoritarian states' linkages to international organisations such as the UN's humanitarian agencies and INGOs.

Humanitarian aid, state sovereignty and resource mobilization

It has been commonly argued that humanitarian principles, and “humanitarian space” to meaningfully pursue them, have been under threat in Syria and indeed in many armed conflicts elsewhere.⁶⁴ Yet we are proposing to take this a step further. The regime's injection of its state sovereignty claims into the international humanitarian effort has had major consequences in that it generated critical benefits and resources that contributed to the regime's resilience while the odds of the conflict in many ways were and to some extent still are stacked against it. Its impact can be discerned endogenously to the delivery of aid and, beyond it, by way of the regime's confirmation and projection of state sovereignty and the opportunities this in turn generated for additional resource mobilisation. In short, these benefits and resources were accrued *through* humanitarianism; not by eroding or marginalizing its agencies, but with their active cooperation and ostensibly for the sake of maintaining a humanitarian space to serve Syrians in need.⁶⁵

- Humanitarian aid, cash and business opportunities

As the Syrian regime asserted its sovereign control over humanitarian agencies and their work, it siphoned off significant parts of the multibillion-dollar humanitarian enterprise. Consequently, the Syrian regime and its supporters generated significant financial resources directly from the humanitarian aid effort as it channelled business and financial opportunities to its cronies and to privileged members of the country's remaining business class. UN agencies and the INGOs in Damascus transferred significant amounts to SARC and Syrian government institutions to pay for salaries, for services, and the use of warehouses. Such

payments were often made against highly inflated and rising prices, and benefited state institutions that were responsible for, or that financed, large-scale repression.⁶⁶ Also, the country's crippled and sanctions-ridden banking sector forced UN agencies to rely on large cash transfers. There have been concerns that the regime seized on the opaque conditions under which such transfers were made. A senior UN official recalled that he was to deliver a very large amount of cash to a ministry involved in a large aid operation in the north of the country, only to see the money being driven away in a military truck heading for the Ministry of Defence.⁶⁷

Real or potential conflicts of interests riddled the UN humanitarian program throughout, and allowed the regime access to additional resources. UN agencies spent large amounts on aid projects in collaboration with the Ministry for Social Affairs and the Ministry of Health while UN administrative staff and managers facilitating and monitoring such payments included former and seconded employees of these same ministries. Between 2012-2015, UN agencies in Syria spent USD 642.3m on local procurement,⁶⁸ contracting state entities and private companies. Among contracted companies were numerous enterprises owned by regime incumbents, often subject to US and/or EU sanctions, and businessmen with a reputation of being extremely close to the Assad family and its associates.⁶⁹ A senior foreign aid worker based in Damascus maintained that when some regime incumbents did not like UN agencies and their partners' choice for procurement they threatened to file corruption charges or they caused administrative procedures for humanitarian operations to be put on hold indefinitely.⁷⁰ Another source, a Damascus-based Syrian businessman with knowledge of UN procurement in Syria, explained a mechanism at work that could be called 'humanitarian front-running'.⁷¹ Local needs assessments were prepared by Syrian aid workers and then allegedly shared with regime incumbents first before being passed on to UN agencies. This placed regime-linked

companies in the privileged position to already arrange necessary imports before tenders were being held for the mostly urgent supply of such goods. Furthermore, a representative of a major donor country formerly based in Damascus reflected that UN agency operatives tended to see regime involvement in awarded companies as potential leverage needed to negotiate wiggle room vis-à-vis the regime, with the latter gaining a stake in aid projects to proceed.⁷²

UN agencies and donors alike insisted that Syrian partners and providers of relief goods and services have been subject to stringent audits for all payments that were made to them. Yet to date no such comprehensive audits, if conducted, have been made public. In fact, UN agencies and their partners are still to fully disclose data on the amounts Syrian government agencies, charities and contractors received and what, exactly, they provided in return.⁷³ Little or nothing has been done to determine, address or prevent the potential loss of resources or inefficiencies caused by doing business with the regime's cronies. Donors, for their part, rarely raised questions, and never did so publicly, perhaps because they had no interest in tarnishing the UN-led aid effort in which they invested so heavily and for which they could not think of an alternative.

- *Channelling aid*

Regime benefits accrued from its aggressive assertion of sovereignty claims through the international humanitarian effort included multiple opportunities to control the very distribution of UN relief. While humanitarian assistance overall fell significantly short of meeting needs throughout the country, at the end of 2013 it became clear that opposition-held areas received far less aid in proportion to the scope and severity of their needs. By holding available survey data of December 2013 on needs-response gaps against Syria's map of regime-controlled and opposition-held territories at around the same time, the latter indeed

appear as having been far less served.⁷⁴ In another survey held nearly one year later and for three key sectors, a much lower percentage of people-in-need were reached in five governorates largely held by the opposition than the countrywide average identified in SHARP 2014.⁷⁵ Raqqa and Idlib --two governorates where opposition forces established their tightest control-- scored highest on a scale of the severity of needs across sectors, but they also reportedly received the least assistance.

UN agencies and their partners stressed that their assistance is purely needs-driven; aid is duly provided when security conditions allow so and when cross-line and/or cross-border operations received authorization by the Syrian government. Yet it is clear that the regime caused UN agencies to respond inadequately in opposition-held areas. When in early 2014 the situation had become intolerable, the UN Security Council responded on 22 February 2014 with Resolution 2139, which expressed “grave alarm” over “the dire situation of over 3 million people in hard-to-reach areas” and demanded that all parties, “in particular the Syrian authorities”, allowed access for humanitarian aid.

Predictably, the regime continued to wield its nominal sovereignty over its borders by denying the UN authorisation to use at least nine border crossings that could have potentially served millions of people in need especially in Idlib and Aleppo; most of these crossings were not even under the government’s effective control. Several international jurists argued that mainly due to the regime’s loss of territorial control unauthorised cross-border assistance by the UN would be fully legal.⁷⁶ Wavering between two opposite positions, UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Valerie Amos variously described the Syrian government’s blocking of crossborder aid as “arbitrary and unjustified” while earlier judging the regime’s obstructive behaviour to be permissible under UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182.⁷⁷ Amos argued

that the Syrian government's prerogatives in this respect could only be overruled by a special Security Council resolution. Consequently, OCHA kept waiting in vain for Syrian government authorisation to make full use of the country's border crossings.

On 14 July 2014, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2165, authorizing UN agencies to "use routes across conflict lines" and four border crossings, "with notification to the Syrian authorities [...]" In short, for assistance to get through Syria's frontlines and border crossings, formal prior approval by the Syrian government was no longer required. Predictably, the Syrian government protested against what it saw as an infringement of its sovereignty.⁷⁸ Yet resolution 2165 failed to prompt a much-needed significant increase of UN-led cross-border assistance to reach opposition-held territory. As an internal OCHA evaluation concluded in March 2016, "the cross-border opportunity has yet to result in a step-change in the scale and reach of the humanitarian operation in Syria."⁷⁹ Boxed in by the regime's measures of control and firmly dependent on the regime to operate from Damascus, UN agencies juggled between the highly pitched expectations placed on them by the international community to step up their aid and the regime's continuous efforts to manipulate or obstruct their operations inside Syria. As a reminder that the international humanitarian agencies' calculus was to remain firmly in favour of the regime, the Syrian government in April 2014 shut down one of the operational INGOs in Damascus, Mercy Corps, penalizing it for providing unauthorised cross-border aid. Other INGOs operating from Damascus were forced to sign a document promising not to get involved in crossborder aid.⁸⁰

UN aid convoys since resolution 2165 –continuously serving a few hundreds of thousands of people-- have been grossly insufficient to meet the large and rising needs in opposition-held areas. To understand why this happened we need to address in some more detail the

arguments that UN humanitarian officials we interviewed presented in their own defence.⁸¹ Firstly, they countered that aid into Syria – especially food aid- did witness a sharp increase immediately following the resolution. Secondly, they argued that following the resolution jihadist rebel groups, especially the “Islamic State” (IS), effectively blocked access to the areas mostly in need, or such rebel groups were so hostile to humanitarian agencies that sending in convoys would have been irresponsible. They concluded that the border crossings that had been formally relieved from the need to obtain regime authorization could therefore not be fully utilized to significantly augment the delivery of aid.

Figures released by WFP indeed point up to an increase in food supplies six weeks following UNSCR 2165, much of it via the border crossings from Turkey.⁸² However, and as noted in internal UN documents, most of this relief went to regime-held areas as residents of rebel-controlled areas continued to flee to regime territories due to, among other factors, severe food shortages.⁸³ Improved aid provision by UN agencies to IDPs therefore went hand in hand with regime claims that the ‘loyal’ population under its control augmented. Meanwhile, rebel-held areas remained underserved.

The second counter-argument pointing up to the inhibiting role of jihadist rebels only partly holds. Humanitarian NGOs operating separately from Turkey said that negotiating humanitarian access was cumbersome but still possible when it came to most insurgency groups including key jihadist groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra and its offshoots.⁸⁴ Many such armed opposition groups have on several occasions obstructed, manipulated and seized humanitarian aid, and they appear to increasingly have done so since the battle of Aleppo in late 2016.⁸⁵ But like many rebel groups elsewhere seeking popular support by providing collective goods and attracting aid,⁸⁶ Syria’s insurgents

generally have been keen on the UN to provide aid. This way rebel groups were bent on demonstrating their concern for the populations under their control just as they hoped that steady aid flows would discourage civilians from fleeing to regime-controlled areas.⁸⁷

In contrast, the attitude of IS to what it perceives as ‘Western’ aid organisations has been sharply more hostile. It kidnapped and executed humanitarian aid workers, demanded full control over relief distribution when approached by aid workers, and looted UN relief goods for handouts among its own supporters after attaching its own label.⁸⁸ IS’ inhospitable attitude on international humanitarian aid appears to be informed by various considerations, including its own unyielding claim on state sovereignty mimicking that of the regime. Regardless, NGOs working in neighbouring Iraq reported some success in negotiating humanitarian access with local IS leaders,⁸⁹ and a UN humanitarian negotiator said he had encountered willingness among local IS ‘emirs’ in Syria to allow in humanitarian aid without imposing draconic conditions.⁹⁰ Leaving this aside, the argument that jihadist rebels prevented humanitarian access since UNSCR 2165 calls for an assessment of IS’ territorial control and its ability to obstruct humanitarian access.

Since January 2014 IS had been pushed into the eastern parts of Syria following clashes with other rebel groups. By the end of 2014 IS re-established firm control in Raqqa from where it expanded to Deir az-Zur, after which it pushed toward the Syrian-Iraqi border and then back westwards regaining some territory. These shifting frontlines were consolidated in January 2015 and were largely left unchanged until Russian airstrikes commenced in September that year. All the same, IS could hardly have obstructed access at or from the Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Hawa crossings into Aleppo and Idlib where a large number of those in need resided; IS had no reported presence in these areas or indeed the main roads leading from them into

both governorates and their capitals.⁹¹ Much the same applies to al-Ramtha border crossing from Jordan where IS had no significant presence.⁹²

In short, the argument of jihadist obstruction of humanitarian access since 2165 may hold for IS but henceforth only for the areas under its control in Deir az-Zur and Raqqa, in addition to pockets of territory westward. Indeed, this left a UN-estimated 720,000 individuals un- or underserved in terms of food aid alone.⁹³ By January 2016 about half of 4.5 million “hard to reach” persons in need reportedly lived in IS-controlled areas.⁹⁴ Yet the argument does not hold for much of Aleppo until it was captured by regime forces in December 2016, large parts of Idlib, and Dar’a in the south. The question remains, therefore, why the border crossings of Bab al-Hawa, Bab al-Salam and al-Ramtha were not used more intensively to reach these three areas. The inadequacy of UN crossborder aid following UNSCR 2165 is all the more striking when one looks at other, non-UN players such as Mercy Corps and their much greater ability in getting humanitarian assistance across Syria’s borders.⁹⁵

Many humanitarian workers and Syrian activists have expressed strong dismay over how UN agencies fell foul to the regime’s manipulations causing aid to be channelled away from rebel-held areas. Some accused UN agencies of being in cahoots with the regime and of repeating its excuses for not letting aid through.⁹⁶ The continued inadequacy of UN cross-border and – frontline assistance put the onus on non-UN humanitarian actors, providing aid clandestinely from southern Turkey into Syria mostly in collaboration with a large group of Syrian-led aid initiatives within rebel-held territories and Syrian Diaspora organisations. Yet while they stepped up aid flows, these remained grossly inadequate. One reason is that most donor countries do not have the institutional capacity to fully fund and manage numerous NGOs that would have to be involved in a humanitarian effort the scale of which is required in Syria.

Hence, between 2012 and 2017 more than half of all available funds for humanitarian assistance inside Syria has gone through the UN system and the Red Cross/ Red Crescent,⁹⁷ much like the worldwide allocation of humanitarian funds generally.⁹⁸ Syrian NGOs working cross-border from Turkey and inside Syria only received a fraction of donor funds.⁹⁹

By failing to correct its biases in aid delivery associated with regime affirmations of its state sovereignty, UN-led humanitarian assistance in Syria has fed into a regime effort to channel material resources to its loyal and passive supporters, and kept aid away from its opponents and the people they control – callously termed the regime’s “starvation until submission campaign”.¹⁰⁰ To increasingly war-weary citizens, the message could not have been clearer: if they were to value a modicum of everyday normalcy and if they stood a chance for survival, the regime was their best bet. In this context, the regime has been quick to claim credit for the aid that has been provided, to the extent of downplaying the role of UN agencies and their superior budget. In February 2014 the Syrian government even made the absurd claim that it accounted for 75 percent of humanitarian aid delivered to the Syrian people compared to “barely 25 percent” provided by international organizations.¹⁰¹ That those living in regime-held areas have been considerably better off can be more accurately attributed to the fact that UN humanitarian assistance disproportionately reached them, and far less so residents in opposition-held areas, and despite the large differences in needs within both areas.

- *Humanitarian assistance within projections of state sovereignty*

On 13 May 2015 UN Resident Humanitarian Coordinator Yaqoub al-Hilo appeared on Syrian state television, al-Ikhbariyeh, explaining his mission.¹⁰² Following a now familiar script, he emphasized that the UN was providing aid in Syria upon the invitation of the Syrian government, according to international law and following government approval. Hilo then

went on to describe the Syrian state as having been a founding member of the UN among other “sovereign and independent nations” and “having been active ever since”: “We recognize and respect Syria’s state sovereignty despite the difficult situation and the extraordinary circumstances.” Leaving no ambiguity about who he considered to be the true legitimate representative of state sovereignty, he described the UN agencies’ headquartering in Damascus as “something natural and self-evident”. Hilo also appeared to imply that the Syrian government *deserved* its status representing state sovereignty. He pointed at the fact that before the crisis Syria had been the third-largest recipient worldwide of Iraqi refugees, “representing humanity at its best”. He furthermore claimed that Syria was in 2015 expected to be one of the best performing countries in terms of meeting the UN Millennium Goals for development.

While the UN’s emphasis on state sovereignty in the context of its humanitarian aid effort in Syria enabled the regime to thrive on and direct significant relief flows, the formal state sovereignty the regime projected, reasserted and built through its interactions with UN humanitarian agencies fed into its broader strategy to defend, magnify and claim state sovereignty generally. As Krasner observed, “rulers seek legal sovereignty because it provides them with an array of material and normative resources and benefits” while it “imposes no costs.”¹⁰³ The Syrian regime’s projections of state sovereignty provides a detailed example of how these brought it huge amounts of political, diplomatic and material support by some influential allies, and became the prime channel through which their aid was delivered.

Russia’s main motivation for supporting the Syrian regime does not seem to lay primarily in material or even geopolitical interests but in the Syrian regime having positioned itself in a

wider contest about the relevance and modalities of state sovereignty.¹⁰⁴ To the Russian leadership, Syria became a focal point of resistance to Western countries that wish to make state sovereignty conditional on how regimes behave toward their own populations. Henceforth, it was in emphatic reference to Syrian state sovereignty and in opposition to the Security Council “going into regime change mode”¹⁰⁵ that Russia vetoed or prevented various draft resolutions that proposed more stringent action in Syria, including a draft resolution in May 2014 that would have authorised the International Criminal Court to investigate allegations over war crimes. Likewise, Russia emphatically framed its dispatch of Russian-operated warplanes to Syria in August 2015 and their subsequent deployment from a regime-held airbase in Latakia by way of a formal bilateral agreement between two sovereign states.¹⁰⁶

Iran, for its own reasons, also provided significant material and military support including by way of “sovereign loans” in excess of US\$5 billion,¹⁰⁷ and by sending its Revolutionary Guards at the behest of the Syrian state. Accordingly, significant material, military and diplomatic support were made available through the regime’s clinging onto its state sovereignty project.

While UN-led humanitarian assistance in Syria, of course, is neither a direct or sole source of the array of benefits that state sovereignty bestowed on the regime, it inadvertently helped to bolster the regime’s claims in this respect as the entire aid effort became premised on these claims, and celebrated and amplified them. By negotiation and extortion involving the international humanitarian effort in Syria, the regime effectively found and seized an opportunity to help push its overall campaign to bolster its claims on state sovereignty for the purpose of its very survival. As a collateral to the regime’s assertions of state sovereignty –

and the international community's complicity in heeding these claims- the Syrian regime essentially and successfully glued its very existence to that of the Syrian state to the extent that some observers argued that the two can no longer be separated.¹⁰⁸ In this view, any regime-change scenario would likely bring about a total dissolution of the Syrian state. Especially with the rise of IS, it has been by promoting this image that the regime has been taking the international community hostage to its maintenance efforts, and that it has been effectively countering calls and pressures for it to step down.

The Syrian 'quasi-state' at war: acting as if it is sovereign

In his Syrian state television interview UN Resident Coordinator Yaqoub al-Hilo repeatedly pointed at what he saw as the Syrian government's unceasing capacity to effectuate state sovereignty in Syria. He observed that Syrian state institutions are still working as usual, and that they provide services to a large number of civilians even in the areas that are not under state control. Close to concurring with government claims cited above, Hilo praised in this context "the Syrian people" for providing most of the humanitarian assistance in their country. Yet in reality, of course, the Syrian regime's claim to represent state sovereignty generally bears little relation to any 'empirical' traits of the term, even when reduced to its bare essence.

Since the end of 2012 Syria's 'state sovereignty' has become virtually meaningless if understood in terms of the state's exclusive control over its territory, its borders and its population, and over the means of coercion. By mid-2015 the regime effectively controlled barely 16 percent of the country's territory and only seven out of 19 official border crossings (five with Lebanon and two more, closed, with Turkey)¹⁰⁹ -- most of them were held by Islamist rebel groups and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), which declared its own

autonomous government or Kurdish proto-state of Rojava in early 2014. IS proclaimed its “caliphate” in the east of the country in June 2014, with its territory reaching far across the Iraqi border up to Mosul, mocking both countries’ state sovereignty aspirations. More favourably to the Syrian regime but still falling dramatically short of empirical sovereign statehood, at the start of 2015 it was estimated to control between 56-72 percent of the country’s remaining population.¹¹⁰ Equally devastating from a state sovereignty perspective, external interference in Syria has spiralled out of control and the state no longer upholds its monopoly on the means of coercion due to its reliance on foreign non-state armed groups, including Hizbullah, and a plethora of pro-regime militias. The “militiafication of Assad’s Syrian state”¹¹¹ may well make it impossible for the regime to ever reconstitute the state’s monopoly on the means of coercion as a basic trait of positive state sovereignty, even in the event that its forces would prevail militarily.

The glaring gap between nominal and positive state sovereignty, of course, is not new or unique to Syria.¹¹² In this respect, Syria may only be an extreme or exaggerated case of a “quasi-state” wherein international humanitarian assistance among other factors played a crucial role in sustaining the myth of state sovereignty. More specifically for Syria, the ways by which the regime’s implausible claims have been upheld externally constitute a bitter irony given the country’s 2011 uprising that categorically put an end to the regime’s pretence at home. Studying pre-uprising authoritarian rule in Syria, Wedeen explored the significance of regime propaganda presenting incredible claims about its qualities and achievements.¹¹³ She argued that citizens do not necessarily believe these claims, nor are they required to do so. Rather, the pretence of such beliefs – by ‘acting as if’—enforces habitual obedience, induces complicity and structures the terms of both compliance and resistance, to the effect of reproducing regime power.

Since 2011, such regime enhancing effects have largely evaporated as the regime largely fell back on naked and brutal repression, stripped from consensual pretence. As Haughbolle put it, “the image is torn, the bond is broken, and the politics of ‘as if’ has been iconoclastically undermined.”¹¹⁴ Thus, while many Syrians came out in the streets to reject the regime’s pretence and armed groups subsequently pressed their own rivalling sovereignty claims, the rest of the world has become complicit in the regime’s grand deception. Wedeens’ analysis on Syria should be extended –or be shifted rather-- to the outside world; to the international community that continues to embrace the regime’s implausible claims on state sovereignty.¹¹⁵ Inadvertently or not, UN agencies and their donors have helped to sustain the regime as the latter injected its claims on state sovereignty into the international humanitarian effort to reach out to its very victims. In the same way Wedeen portrayed the regime’s domestic audiences, no one is expected to actually *believe* as long as one participates and the very real effects of false pretence are upheld. Bashar al-Assad remarked in December 2011 when asked why Syria bothered to send an ambassador to the United Nations: “Yeah, it’s a game we play. It doesn’t mean you believe in it.”¹¹⁶

Whither State Sovereignty, Humanitarianism and Authoritarian Linkages?

For much of the literature on both state sovereignty and humanitarianism, the Syrian crisis would appear as having catapulted state sovereignty unexpectedly back into international politics through the humanitarian realm. Of course, those studying the “manipulation” of humanitarian aid at times of armed conflict have long recognized that aid recipients and protagonists in civil wars can be calculative and assertive players.¹¹⁷ Yet congruent with understandings of declining state sovereignty generally, most work in this context came to emphasize the manipulations by and challenges emanating from non-state actors, including

rebel groups.¹¹⁸ Likewise, this literature underscored the seemingly unstoppable dominance of international humanitarian organisations in their dealings with the ‘South’. There may have been some good reasons for this perspective, as much of this literature sprang from a focus on sub-Saharan Africa’s “complex emergencies” in the 1990s, and their corresponding “weak”, “fragile” or “failed” states.¹¹⁹ Yet at the very least the Syrian case calls for caution against generalizing this narrative or assuming its unremittant validity. Perhaps the Syrian crisis can be viewed as part of a trend wherein state sovereignty is reclaiming its significance in war-induced humanitarian crises. Indeed, the Syrian regime’s bureaucratic obstruction and manipulation of humanitarian aid echoes similarly assertive government action elsewhere, including in Darfur at the end of the 2000s,¹²⁰ and in Sri Lanka at the final stages of its civil war, in 2008-9.¹²¹ In both cases regimes also embraced loud narratives on state sovereignty to control and curb humanitarian agencies. Yet in Darfur and Sri Lanka the state pushed its control over humanitarian agencies to the extent that the latter were expelled or felt compelled to leave. Such turned these two countries into hard cases of “humanitarian access denial”.¹²² As we demonstrated, the Syrian regime similarly pushed its state sovereignty claims onto and through international humanitarian agencies as it aimed at fully controlling the aid effort, if necessary by denying local humanitarian access. Yet it has been much more determined, and cunning, in ensuring that aid workers stayed on and continued to provide an array of benefits, and bolster its state sovereignty claims.

As noted earlier, rarely has such a strong positive connection between humanitarian aid and state sovereignty been acknowledged.¹²³ Our findings in this respect show more resemblance with the ways in which a handful of scholars writing on official development aid took issue with the similarly common notion of fading state sovereignty in their field of study.¹²⁴ As we

found for humanitarian assistance in Syria, they argued that development aid assumed, reproduced and reinforced recipient states' sovereignty claims.

The Syrian regime's resource mobilization strategies, by way of its assertions of state sovereignty and cooperation with UN humanitarian agencies and INGOs, suggest an important dimension to authoritarian regimes' international linkages that scholars on the subject are yet to explore. Much of the discussion in this field has been preoccupied with questions whether other authoritarian states, dubbed "black knights", engage in active "autocracy promotion" abroad, whether overlapping interests of authoritarian regimes rather drive their cooperation, or whether authoritarian regimes' ties to Western democracies equally have regime-reinforcing effects.¹²⁵ The for authoritarian regimes' self-enhancing qualities of cooperation with international organisations, like in the case of Syria's embrace of UN humanitarian agencies, have received scant attention in this literature. Neither have students of UN agencies been much interested in how the latter may bolster authoritarian regimes while some work did explore the UN's "democracy" enhancing role.¹²⁶ From this perspective, our case study can be viewed as underscoring a recommendation by one important and comprehensive assessment of the literature on the international politics of authoritarianism. As suggested by Tansey, the ways in which international organisations act as supporters or enablers of authoritarian rule warrant further study.¹²⁷ Drawing on our findings, we should add that a focus on state sovereignty -- deployed in regimes' cooperation with international organisations and being re-affirmed in the process-- gives important clues about and added importance to such linkages, and how the latter are played out to reaffirm autocratic rule.

Indirectly, our linking of authoritarian resilience and international organisations, and UN humanitarian agencies more specifically, may also help inform a new perspective on the role

of “black knights” in propping up other authoritarian regimes. UN agencies bestowed a degree of credibility on the Syrian regime’s state sovereignty claims while under these conditions their aid provision generated an amount of resources for regime maintenance purposes that few individual black knight states could match. Interestingly, these dynamics suggest a strong free rider quality to black knight states’ manoeuvring as neither Russia nor Iran contributed financially to UN-led humanitarian assistance in Syria and yet aggressively pursued regime-reinforcing policies by their behaviour in UN institutions generally.¹²⁸

Finally, our case study points up to the relevance of a constructivist approach to the study of the international politics of authoritarian rule. Scholars of authoritarian regimes’ international linkages are right to be dissatisfied with once predominant approaches to authoritarianism that analyse such regimes’ durability primarily in domestic terms. Our argument about imagined state sovereignty being directed outward to draw in external audiences provides another reason to take the international dimensions of authoritarianism seriously. As we demonstrated, the Syrian regime effectively upheld its state sovereignty claims, however fancy and at odds with empirical sovereignty, by turning to the UN agencies and their donors. Such defies notions that the theatre of such sovereignty claims should necessarily or even primarily be situated domestically. Indeed, from this perspective there appears to be no reason to believe that sovereign states’ “staying ability will ultimately rest on how well they tie into [their] people’s hearts.”¹²⁹ This is not to suggest that the regime’s external sovereignty game, or the UN agencies’ central role in it, on its own explains the regime’s resilience. Yet at times of civil war and with sharply contested state sovereignty at home, deploying UN humanitarian agencies to project and bolster the regime’s sovereignty claims abroad brought the Syrian regime crucial respite. It extracted crucial resources from doing so, exactly when the regime’s domestic base had never been more precarious.

Conclusion

In this article we have sought to demonstrate the ways in which during the Syrian crisis humanitarianism, state sovereignty and authoritarian regime maintenance have become closely intertwined. It is the nature and intensity of these linkages that make the Syrian crisis so instructive, next to and beyond the vast scale of Syria's humanitarian needs and the inadequate scale of the international response. Within this framework we argued that, firstly, while the Syrian regime's state sovereignty claims facilitated its tight control over the UN-led humanitarian aid effort, the latter in turn became a platform to project and magnify these claims, and to get them routinely confirmed by UN agencies and their international donors. Secondly, we detailed how the Syrian regime's injection of its state sovereignty claims into the humanitarian aid effort gave it access to critical benefits and resources that fed into its efforts of authoritarian regime maintenance at times of acute threats to its survival. Thirdly, and drawing on the notion of state sovereignty as a social construct, we showed that in response to its loss of compliant domestic audiences for its non-credible claims of accomplishments, the regime managed to adjust by turning its state sovereignty claims to external audiences, primarily by way of its cooperation with UN humanitarian agencies and their donors.

We suggested that our findings are relevant for scholarly debates on state sovereignty, humanitarianism, and the international dimensions of authoritarian rule. In this context, a number of complementary research avenues appear to us as especially worthwhile to pursue. Most importantly, the study of humanitarianism and the salience of state sovereignty need to better communicate, and establish whether there is a discernible trend wherein, due to assertive actions by authoritarian regimes, state sovereignty is reclaiming its significance in

war-induced humanitarian crises. It would be particularly interesting to establish whether there are ‘learning effects’ involving such regimes’ strategic posturings, as some have suggested in the case of Sri Lanka and Sudan. Work on the international politics of authoritarianism may be instructive in this respect, as it already began to conceptualise and explore “authoritarian learning” and “emulation” generally.¹³⁰ Finally, and from a normative or policy perspective, the study of humanitarian negotiations should focus on the humanitarian effort in Syria and other cases of re-affirmed state sovereignty in humanitarian crises to develop strategies, tactics and tools that equip humanitarian actors to more effectively resist and confront authoritarian states’ manipulation and appropriation of aid.

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¹²⁴ William Brown, “Sovereignty Matters: Africa, Donors, and the Aid Relationship,” *African Affairs*, 112 (447); Jonathan Fisher, “Structure, Agency and Africa in the International System: Donor diplomacy and Regional Security Policy in East Africa since the 1990s,” *Conflict, Security & Development*, 13 (5), 2013: 537-567; Ann Hironaka, *Neverending Wars: The International Community, Weak States, and the Perpetuation of Civil War*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 63; Bertrand Badie, *The Imported State: The Westernization of the Political Order*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 37, 131-132.

¹²⁵ See e.g.: Steven Levitsky & Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Peter Burnell, “Is There a New Autocracy Promotion?,” Working Paper 96, (Madrid: Fríde, March 2010), accessed at http://fride.org/download/WP96_Autocracy_ENG_mar10.pdf; Oisín Tansey, Kevin Koehler, and Alexander Schmotz, “Ties to the Rest: Autocratic Linkages and Regime Survival,” *Comparative Political Studies*, 50 (9), 2017, 1221-1254. For a critical discussion of this literature see: Tansey, “The Problem with Autocracy Promotion.”

¹²⁶ See e.g. Christopher C. Joyner, “The United Nations and Democracy,” *Global Governance* 5 (3), 1999, 333-357.

¹²⁷ Tansey, *International Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, 200.

¹²⁸ In 2015 Russia contributed to UN-led humanitarian assistance in the Syrian crisis the equivalent of exactly zero percent of its “fair share”, as calculated by OXFAM (2015). UN financial data (UN-OCHA Financial Tracking Service, 2012-176) suggests that Iran has not made any contribution to UN-led humanitarian assistance in Syria.

¹²⁹ Joel S. Migdal, *State in Society: Studying how States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 167.

¹³⁰ See: Stephen G.F. Hall, and Thomas Ambrosio, “Authoritarian Learning: a Conceptual Overview,” *East European Politics* 33.2 (2017), 143-161; Kurt Weyland, “Crafting Counterrevolution: How Reactionaries Learned to Combat Change in 1848,” *American Political Science Review* 110.2 (2016), 215-231; André Bank and Mirjam Edel, “Authoritarian Regime Learning: Comparative Insights from the Arab Uprisings,” 8 June 2015, accessed at <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2615708> .